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ABSTRACT

This collaborative paper, created online by Ph.D students in a three-year cohort learning program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, explores the development and felt experience of distance learning. The purpose is to give a sense of how it feels to learn online and to describe the essence of learning. Results of this collaborative inquiry are discussed in terms of the development of non-traditional online learning, notable learning differences between non-traditional schools and online non-traditional schools, the influence of support on how online communities learn, the medium of electronic learning, and the medium as a theme within the authors' inquiry group. Poems and reflections are included as part of the discussion on the qualitative aspects of online learning. (Contains 20 references.) (AEF)

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Research Paper: Curriculum and Instructional Strategies

Difficulties Bring Wisdom: Online Learners Learn How Online Communities Learn

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Abstract

This collaborative paper, created online by Ph.D. students in a three-year cohort learning program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, explores the development and felt experience of distance learning.

Introduction

Difficulties bring Wisdom
Struggles bring Knowledge
Endurance and Perseverance wrought Mastery
Life breeds Troubles
From Chaos I seek Peace
Lest I surmount obstacles aforementioned
Knell rings on this body
Peace shall endure

If body dance knell what a sad beginning
In my soul, I shall be FREEEEEE!!!

The poems and art in this paper are included as part of our discussion on the QUALITATIVE aspects of online learning. Our purpose is to both give a sense of the whole; the how are we doing/how does it feel to learn online, and to describe essences of this learning. A sample of what we learned is reflected in one of our own inquiry group member's posting:

> *"As I reflect on my view of how online communities learn, I am conscious of how new a concept this really is. How amazing that we can have relationships with people through thin little twisted wires, looking at computer screens and teaching and learning with each other. I'm in awe of what the human mind can accomplish, and yet inside I wonder why I thought it would be difficult."*

Methodology

We attempted an intentional interplay between reflection and making sense on the one hand, and experience and action on the other (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). We communicated with each other online and with our outside sources by e-mail, the dtl commons (online student commons at our Web site), and telephone. We followed case-study format (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) in our open-ended interviews and critical

thinking in our review of the literature. We posted our findings and then took turns integrating the text.

We pay explicit attention to the validity of this inquiry and its findings through triangulation with each of our own experience and other CIIS (California Institute of Integral Studies) online groups, the literature, and outside online learning communities.

As well as validity procedures, we bring a range of special skills suited to such experiential inquiry: poetry, art, self-knowledge, therapeutic and organizational skills, playfulness, and traditional roots.

Results of Our Inquiry: What We Learned

Online Learning: An Overview

The growth of distance learning has brought with it many complications and developments. In our research, we discovered that distance learning evolved from mail correspondence through radio and television to, now, the Internet—using a chain of computers linked together by telephone lines. As we set out to gather material for this research, the first question that came to mind was: What is distance learning? From an electronic point of view, Bruder (1989) defines it as:

> *"... the use of telecommunications equipment such as the telephone, television, fiber optics, cable broadcast, and satellites to send instructional programming to learners. The distance could be across the hall or across the continent, and the learners are students of all ages and levels, as well as teachers and administrators receiving professional development. Often, the learners have a chance for live interaction with the source of instruction and with other distant learners."*

We looked at the development of non-traditional education which hosts degree-granting online programs such as ours. In 1973, Edward B. Nyquist, then president of the University of the State of New York, spoke of the need for such alternative learning environments (Bear, 1992):

> *"Through native intelligence, hard work and sacrifice, many have gained in knowledge and understanding. And yet the social and economic advancement of these people has been thwarted in part by the emphasis that is put on the possession of credentials, those who cannot or have not availed themselves of this route but have acquired knowledge and skills.*
>
> *"There are thousands of people ... who contribute in important ways to the life of the communities in which they live, even though they do not have a college degree. Through native intelligence, hard work and sacrifice, many have gained in knowledge and understanding. And yet the social and economic advancement of these people has been thwarted in part by the emphasis that is put on the possession of*

> *credentials ... (they) will be denied the recognition and advancement to which they are entitled. Such inequity should not be tolerated."*

On this premise, non-traditional schools began mushrooming to cater to the needs of those with life experience.

Our inquiry moved to focus on the online community of learners in a non-traditional setting. In a telephone conversation, Dean Peter Pick of Columbia Pacific University (a totally non-traditional institution since 1978) attempted to answer the question: How do these non-traditional students learn?

> *"A great majority of millions of post-secondary students who are attending traditional college are doing so because it is a thing to do. Students in our program are doing so because it is a thing that means much to them. A majority of students are accomplished individuals. Our program affords them the opportunity to document their life experiences and earn credible diplomas for it."*

> *"Students in our programs begin by presenting evidence of their prior education and career activities. Then using guidelines provided by the university, they relate their interests to new independent study plans or a learning contract."*

In answer to our query: How do you know when a student has acquired a new body of knowledge? Peter answered:

> *"By demonstration of competency through one of several methods. Depending on the degree being pursued, a student also presents a bachelor's Independent Study Project (ISP), a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation to demonstrate that a certain standard of knowledge and ability has been achieved ...."*

It seems the most important aspect of the non-traditional method is the learning experience that each student brings into the program. This forms the core of each student's evaluation and the fulcrum about which further learning revolves. Primarily, non-traditional institutions award college level credits to students with commendable life experience by one or a combination of methods of evaluation: credit by examination, presentation of life experience portfolio, a presentation of sample works or awards, appearance for interview before a panel, written paper, presentation of copies of speeches given, or any other method that shows mastery of an aspect of life-learning (Brown, 1994). Students must be able to demonstrate that their life-learning experiences measure up to the standard of a required college course. It is important to note here that college level credit can be earned for most activities that are taken for granted, such as reading the Bible or visiting a museum. All of these are learning processes that non-traditional institutions consider to be superior methods of learning, often overlooked by traditional colleges.

Notable Learning Difference between Non-Traditional Schools and Online Non-Traditional Schools

Collaboration as a learning tool is a common thread linking the learning methodologies of both non-traditional face-to-face (FTF) and online schooling. The non-traditional school employs documentation as the major concern of the learning process, whereby students interact with their own life-long learning. Learning is documented by bringing such knowledge into agreement with the newly acquired field or area of interest under the collaborative supervision of a mentor. In contrast, online students learn more from collaboration with other members of their cohort, as evident by our own learning at CIIS. The success of all non-traditional methods is based on the upheaval of past knowledge of the individual student, and the development of a totally new expertise from a marriage of past knowledge with the present or newly acquired information. This is transformational learning.

The learning that occurs with peers has been documented as a resounding element in learning in general (Plater, 1995) and we believe the online environment creates a special "field" for transformational learning. We found this field created a unique online experience of support.

Support

We were curious about what influence "support" had on how online communities learned. While we were engaging in our research questions, Cohort 7 was preparing for their Demonstration of Competency (DOC). Cohort 7 had chosen support—of each other and the group as a whole—as a primary focus.

To determine how Cohort 7 defined support, the following references to support were identified by reviewing Marti Anderson's and Robert L. Stilger's, *Introduction: Support Paper* (1998): "web of connection and support that sustains us emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually," "support process of action/reflection cycles," "to be collaboratively creative," "to step outside of our own perspective," "to be of service to ourselves and others," "a dance," "action," "attention," "light-hearted community," "dialogue," "love and honesty," "deeply listened to and heard," and "mingled energy." Support was also defined by what it was not ("shadow side"): "lack of movement," "breakdowns in process," "breakdowns in dynamics," "getting side-tracked," "non-response to thoughts and ideas," "feeling judged or ignored," and "silence."

Cohort 9 says:

> *"I think/feel online communities learn from their interactions with each other, enhanced by the trust and relationships built up at the intensives. As we open our hearts and minds to each other with interest, we start to really listen and to hear what we need for our own growth and development."*

This point—that face-to-face contact is also needed for learning—is supported by other sources. Online learners feel the "absence of body language and other visual cues (which call for) extreme effort to generate dialogue and not just have a subject fade away before people respond" (Weisner,1998).

A member of Cohort 3 writes in response to: How do online communities learn?:

> *"Online communities seem to" me to learn by first developing a community where it is safe to take risks and explore who we are as a collective. This takes a constantly present facilitator as well as skills in online communications, as well as leaders who take first steps to reveal themselves. Then, students in online learning communities begin to learn together, both cooperatively and collaboratively."*

Another C3 member, who has also experienced every online cohort at CIIS, writes:

> *"Based on my experience with C3, online communities learn through developing a continuous connection of love and trust, of acceptance of differences, and of creating an online container that holds all of this continuously. This is the key ... the online environment allows for this trusting connection continuously, where face-to-face really doesn't ... It detracts from my learning experience only if I insist that is the only way I can access learning, and forget that it is merely a window to the world, and that I can do all of these things in my face-to-face life. The online medium, is just a tool ... it's how we use it that makes it a tool for supporting a learning community ... I have found that the online component can be used to support learning in the world and in our communities."*

The ability of the environment to hold/support all the members' experiences is an on-going theme defining what is necessary for a learning community . Feeling not supported is the shadow side of online learning and is also experienced by members. From Cohort 7: "I try not to get in my feeling about the cohort when I am in these dark moods. The reason is simply, that the cohort is my source of support," "I expect to EXPERIENCE personal growth through support ...." "I get support when we can fight like cats and dogs and underneath it all we know we care very much for each other," "Sometimes we felt a lack of movement and this does not feel supportive," "Many of us have felt at one point or another a lack of intellectual support and challenge," "For some of us, the cohort is not a place we experience spiritual support."

From the dtl commons:

> *"... soon I start to lose interest if the pace isn't matching mine. But I have responsibilities to my cohort to keep things going, so I constantly feel I have to weigh the group effort vs. my individual learning effort. This is a different kind of learning, and, I've got to admit, emotionally stifling."*

From our own cohort C11:

> *"At this point I'd like to say that I am feeling it very difficult to keep up with onlineness. I am feeling the loneliness of it. Just a comment from my home office where I am surrounded by machines."*

The Medium of Electronic Learning

One C11 member states:

> *"The one thing that I have noticed about everyone here ... there seems at times to be a plea for help ... and then appears a metaphor, a story, a summary ... a copy of an article or book, a heartfelt explanation ... or you borrow learning from each other, like some did in the research design for the research course last quarter ... I am noticing that there is a strong sense of compassion and responsibility for each other. Our "field" is strong ..."*

Through the Internet a Web of connection has been established for those who participate. The Internet tool has been described as "paving the way for exploration, like artists' tools are ready for contemporary expression at the vanguard of society" (Will, 1997). The nature of the electronic medium for online learning communities is developing a way of being and learning that is different than in a face-to-face classroom.

One online learner responds to our inquiry: How do online communities learn?

> *"Members provide crucial support to each other in a 24-hour a day format. This support can be provided both publicly (in the forums) and privately (e-mail and chats)—The community creates a dialogue that engages all the learners, and mutually challenges their thinking. The online forums allow for reflection, contemplation, and great depth of discussion. Connectivity: provides means for information and idea transfer independent of time and place; logistically the community can learn (and remain a community) despite the demands of daily life ... the written record of the classes provides archives for research, the ability to look back at our collective learning process, and learn from that."*

"The information stays with you" is the thesis of the online educational method at the University of Phoenix. Comparing this method with a regular classroom, Joe Brieding, a self-employed University of Phoenix MBA graduate (1998) said:

> *"in a physical classroom, you ask questions, and the answer comes back, and you move on to the next question, and the answer kind of goes away. In the online situation, you get to think about it. The 'wait time' you get on a question is really, really valuable... discussions tend to dig deeper into each subject, giving you a better understanding of how you can apply ..."*

Learning seems to go deeper, say many, and they are different after it. The learning is internalized and made their own: transformation occurs.

> *"As one revisits a conversation, recalls a situation, sees how others handle it (silently or otherwise), the learning goes on, deeper, broader."*

> *"To me, learning online has allowed time to think about a response, encouragement to make that response at any later date, and a great deal more insight in topics than traditional lecture where often only the instructor holds the floor."*

> *"Cohort 3's experience taught us the significance of being ruled not by explicit rules but by good intention and consciousness ... I see a similar pattern taking shape with cohort 7. I wonder if the medium is influencing the shape of the cohort's journey ... Of all the spoken and unspoken norms, the only one remaining a consistent norm, seems to be that we should care about each other, a level of concern, involvement, empathy or sympathy should prevail ... This does not, it seems, set a level of participation or doing. Rather, it sets a level of trust. The online cohorts have to perhaps think seriously and creatively as to how they can get the unconscious, movement, spiritual, intuitive dimensions encompassed in their community building process."*

A reflective field is created with online learning where reciprocity and spirituality are "essential elements" (Weisner, 1998). Weisner speaks of Rheingold's (1993) research into virtual communities where there is reciprocity which is "like a gift economy where people do things for one another with the spirit of building something between them." When that spirit exists, he suggests, everybody gets a little extra something, a little sparkle from their more practical transactions, and different things become possible when this mindset pervades. Spirit, although difficult to define, and even harder to foster online, is considered to be one of the most important aspects for collaboration and learning.

This electronic field creates a playspace, a container that perhaps even resonates with our own electronic flesh and blood bodies: minus our faces and our skins. In this online space Turkle (1995, p.70) speaks of how we learn as in a video game, where "...you soon realize that to learn to play you have to play to learn. You do not first read a rulebook or get your terms straight." We are interactive with the medium itself, and must be so, in order to learn. Is this the definition of spirituality? Are we connecting in this way in the same way we connect to the Universe?

Other online learners report similar thinking:

> *"We were astonished at how quickly we formed close bonds, attributable perhaps to the 'safety' of the online medium which tends to be less threatening than face-to-face encounters ... We were able to absorb the richness of peoples' life stories, feelings, and thoughts, without the distractions created by a physical presence. This purity of interchange, spartan as it was, is often put forward as a major drawback of online communications. For us, it was to prove otherwise." (Forming the Circle: Growing a Learning Community).*

> *"This flexible organic movement really bespoke the notion of a container that we created which responded to our group needs as they emerged. This 'container' held our willingness to look and look again at ourselves, each other and our relationships as a part of our learning."*

> *"The online learning environment can be said to resemble a concentric spiral with the individual at the center and the 'circles' of small group, cohort, Institute, collective MetaNet (our Web site host) learning community and the Internet beyond as an open-system learning medium. Learning and change comes from within each individual and affects the concentric spheres in a systemic relationship resembling ripples radiating outwards from a stone cast in a pool of water."*

And the shadow side of the environment also exists. One CIIS student writes about the detractions that

> *"included the dryness and narrowness of text-based communication, a sense of isolation and tiredness from sitting alone in front of a computer screen at home, day after day. I felt at times that my speaking skills were getting rusty relative to my writing skills and that the visual/text input was a bit lopsided. Technical difficulties could arise, and sometimes dialing in was a struggle ... Another distraction was the misunderstanding, suspicion of; and lack of credibility regarding online learning amongst the general public and within CIIS itself during the 1993–1996 time period when I was participating in the program."*

The online learning environment for some is "neutral" and many find it not conducive to learning, especially when their skills are not at their fingertips. We experienced this in C11, notably at the very beginning, where some members were completely unfamiliar with the Internet, or had purchased new equipment and had a huge learning curve to overcome just dealing with getting to the virtual classroom. This was also experienced in C9. Our cohort dealt with the differences in computer skills by identifying those who were skilled, and using their expertise to teach the rest. This has helped to build a stronger group, and has engaged us more fully in a group learning environment, where all are learners. Says C11:

> *"For me, being primarily online isn't limiting, in a negative sense. More in a hunger for more sense ... And, I'm finding, the more awareness and consciousness I have, as I participate here, the more I'm fed wonderfully full circle!"*

> *"This environment wouldn't work nearly as well for me without the group. I can't imagine doing this on my own. Having 15 people literally at my fingertips makes so much difference: support, assistance, friendship, etc."*

The Medium as a Theme within Our Inquiry Group

In our own research process, we felt that we were "held" by each other on and offline and that our presences were known and experienced even though we were not literally in touch. The communities we have built and are in the process of building online appear to be essential to our learning. We depend on each other for support and encouragement, guidance and understanding. It seems to us, as it seems

to other learners, that the learning wouldn't be the same without the group; that the interaction in many cases is vital for the learning.

We liked the asynchronic nature of the online medium:

> *"Much of (my learning) is linked to the medium, to this online environment that captures the written word and displays it for all to see, and review, and look at again. The ability to be in the classroom at any time, on any day, and not miss a thing. The ability to go back and re-read a discussion, adding points here and there, gaining new understanding from the review. This is a new kind of experience, and a new way of learning."*

We too missed the face-to-face contact and sometimes yearned for more. We felt loneliness when we weren't in touch and not as able to learn.

> *"... Hi everybody—whew I feel better now we're all here. I have all of your faces and bodies in my head (I hope it's not too crowded in there) and know I was having all kinds of feelings about not having us all here in our space together. I like all your blue names on my screen with those blue lines under them. I feel your hugs and your eyes. I am learning by being held, and that it matters that I learn.*

Summary

This learning experience has been a marvel of adjustments and excitement, frustration and joy for us. It has stretched us beyond our imaginations into a new world of interconnection We have learned so much, and yet there is so much yet to know. We continue to feel we learn by digging into our own backyards and bringing our treasures to share with each other, seeing what we've all found.

Reflections, a mirror, a pond, light
Trust—5 sets of hands working together, but not always in sync
Emergence, to trust the process; to trust the hands
Learning that one knows
Being together, linked in mind and through technology

Exploring separately and together

Reflections, a mirror, a pond, each other.

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